

Air Force radio operators

Airman 1st Class Steven Brumley (left) and Senior Airman Jeremy Cole hand out bottled water and fresh fruit to villagers near their remote camp in the southern Ethiopian district of Bilate. The Airmen, and the Soldiers they work with, make such visits once a week.

Keeping the 'comm' up in

Africa

Airmen in Ethiopia keep Soldiers connected

story by Staff Sgt. Francesca Popp
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Outside the fence of Contingency Operating Location Bilate, known as Camp Bilate, a remote outpost bordered by grass-hut villages in southern Ethiopia, packs of hyenas roam. After sunset, their distinctive laughing cries fill the still night.

In the distance, vultures circle in the warm sky, waiting to land at an abandoned kill and feast on what predators leave behind.

The camp in the country's Bilate district is remote. The closest town is a day's drive away, and headquarters for Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa is nearly 500 miles to the northeast. So for U.S. servicemembers, the ability to communicate with the outside world ranks right up there with having fresh air to breathe.

That's why radio operators Senior Airman Jeremy Cole and Airman 1st Class Steven Brumley keep their communication equipment working all the time. The Soldiers they work with count on them.

"The little things — like having e-mail and a network connection — are huge morale boosters," Airman Cole said. He deployed to the outpost from the 325th Communications Squadron at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla.

"It's a great feeling when (the Soldiers) come to you with a challenge," he said. "They can ask us anything, and we'll figure out a way to make it happen."

The only Airmen at the camp, they left Camp Lemonier, Djibouti, to work with Guam Army National Guard Soldiers at the camp. The Soldiers, who can spend from a year to 18 months in the country, are training members of the Ethiopian National Defense Force.

The Airmen's contributions to the mission don't go unnoticed by the Soldiers.

"We've had very little interruption with communications," said 1st

Lt. David Afaisen, the officer in charge at the camp. The Soldiers are from the Guam Guard's 2nd Platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion of the 294th Infantry Regiment (Light).

"When the Internet goes down, they're on it. They're like, 'Sir, it's going to be up in 5 to 10 minutes,'" the lieutenant said.

Far from their tropical island home, the Soldiers depend on the Airmen to communicate with the task force headquarters. They use radio communications to request everything from fuel to fresh vegetables, for airlift support — everything.

Airman Brumley, deployed from the 65th Communications Squadron, Lajes Field, Azores, doesn't mind the remoteness and long hours. He likes being able to handle any communication issues that may come up. That's what makes the job rewarding.

The Airman said he is glad he could help "by bringing these guys communications and morale while they carry out their mission."

As the sun sets and the nighttime hunters hit the nearby bush in search of a meal, the Airmen continue their task. They can't afford to let their communication system go down. Because in the months Airmen have been on this — their first — deployment, they have learned there is no room for service rivalries at this camp.

"When I started working next to them (Guam Army guardsmen), they opened their arms and welcomed the Air Force," Airman Cole said.

The Airmen venture outside the camp, visiting local villages with the Soldiers. There, they take part in sporting events and physical training. They also distribute food and water. Lieutenant Afaisen said the Airmen "have a lot of fun" doing that.

It's the interaction with the community outside the camp Airman Brumley is most proud of.



Troubleshooting a network connectivity problem with Army Sgt. Patrick Flores is part of the job Airman 1st Class Steven Brumley does at Camp Bilate. Two Airmen are helping operate and maintain communications systems for Guam guardsmen at the camp in Ethiopia's remote Bilate district.



Cresting a hill during a two-mile hike are Spc. Albert Samana, Airman 1st Class Steven Brumley and Spc. Manno Raigelig. The hikes are part of the guardsmen's weekly fitness regimen in which Airman Brumley, a radio operator, takes part. In the distance are the half-dome barracks that house most of the Ethiopian troops in training.



To help foster good relations, U.S. servicemembers at Camp Bilate regularly deliver fresh fruit and bottled water to local villagers like this family at the village of Chafa. Their grass hut, supported by a dome-shaped frame of woven sticks, took six months to build.



Guam

guardsman Sgt. John Ogo [in sunglasses in background] and fellow Soldiers teach combat defensive tactics to Ethiopian commandos, who often integrate mid-air flips to their choreographed training sessions.

Vultures feed on a cow carcass by a road leading from Camp Bilate to a nearby military training site. A civilian vehicle had struck the cow a week earlier.



The Ethiopian flag, fluttering in the breeze next to the Stars and Stripes, is one of the world's newest flags, having been adopted Feb. 6, 1996.



Once a week, radio operator Senior Airman Jeremy Cole cleans and checks the connections on a communications dish that transmits and receives data and voice signals at Camp Bilate.